

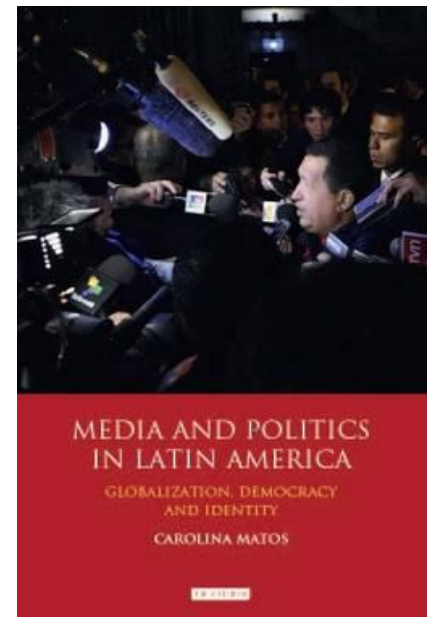
# The UK, with its sophisticated system of media regulation and the respect and popularity of the BBC, is a model of broadcasting from which Brazil can learn

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*In this recent book, **Carolina Matos** considers how the media might enhance democracy and development in Latin America, and how public service broadcasting can play a vital part in the process. **Mark Dinneen** sees it as essential reading for all those studying the Latin American media, but it is also likely to be of interest to many with a general interest in media systems or in Latin American politics.*

**Media and Politics in Latin America: Globalization, Democracy and Identity. Carolina Matos. I.B.Tauris. November 2011.**

The long-running debate over the role of the mass media appears to have reached a new level of intensity in many countries in recent years. The power, conduct and increasingly concentrated ownership of the corporate media, the future role of public service broadcasting, the possibilities for community media, and the impact of new technology are among the key issues of concern driving the debate. In this context, this wide-ranging and well-organised book by [Carolina Matos](#), which takes on board virtually all these topics, is particularly welcome. Matos is a journalist and academic, and a former Fellow in Political Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Such in-depth studies on the Latin American media published in English are in short supply, and this work should certainly reinforce Matos' growing reputation as a major scholar in the field.



It is an ambitious book, not only in terms of its broad scope and the extensive research and multifaceted methodology that underpins it, but also in its complex, multidisciplinary approach. In addition to leading scholars of the media, Matos confidently draws upon theory from such disciplines as cultural studies, political science and development studies. All are clearly necessary for exploring such difficult and intensely debated questions as the relationship between the media

and political change (particularly the consolidation of democratic politics in Latin American countries like Brazil), audience responses to both commercial and public service media, and television's representation of Brazilian society and culture.

However, most important for Matos' analysis of the current state of the Latin American media is her very effective use of a comparative perspective. Throughout, she constantly contrasts the historical development, role and regulation of the European broadcast media, especially that of the UK, with that of Latin America, with the emphasis on Brazil, drawing out similarities and differences in order to shed light on how that media might enhance democracy and development in Latin America, and how public service broadcasting can play a vital part in the process.

In Brazil, as elsewhere in Latin America, the commercial model promoted by the US has dominated broadcasting. Public service broadcasting, which in many European countries has served as a vital educational and cultural tool, and facilitated the viewers' engagement with the democratic life of the nation, has played a marginal role. Its audiences in Brazil have generally been very limited, and its independence has been constantly undermined by its exploitation as a vehicle for particular political and commercial interests. However, that does not necessarily mean that there is widespread indifference towards public service television, and Matos finds hope in the fact that a survey she conducted with university students indicated that a large majority recognised its importance and value. She concludes that the UK, with its "sophisticated system" of media regulation and the respect and popularity of the BBC, is a relatively successful model of broadcasting from which Brazil can learn, but the country's strikingly different social, cultural and political conditions mean that it will have to find its own distinctive form of regulation and public service broadcasting.

Matos' argument in support of radical media reform is coherent and persuasive. She shows how new regulation of Brazilian broadcasting could enable it to serve the interests of the public at large, rather than those of powerful minority groups, and how the undoubted potential of a still marginalised public service television can be realised, providing balanced reporting and quality programming, stimulating discussion and representing different opinions and tastes, so enabling it to respond to Brazil's extraordinary regional, social and cultural diversity. It is in this sense that Matos sees a revitalised broadcasting system as capable of promoting social inclusion and vibrant, democratic politics.

The ultimate goal, she concludes, must be to create new participatory forms of decision-making, not only at the national and regional level, but at the international level too, so as to give Latin America greater weight in the global politics which, dominated by the developed western economies, have long disadvantaged the region. Whilst fully acknowledging the huge internal and external barriers to radical media reform, Matos remains optimistic that it is achievable. Her idealism, and the unwavering conviction that the media can and must play a major role in the struggle for greater justice, equality and democracy, in Brazil and beyond, is what gives the book

much of its force. It is an excellent combination of thorough academic research and passion for the cause being advocated.

Perhaps inevitably with a book of such ambitious scope, there are some significant issues referred to in passing that merited more attention. For example, although Matos discusses at some length the potential of the internet for democratising the production of information and expanding political debate in Latin America, she says little about the possible role for the community media outlets, especially radio, that have grown steadily in many Latin American countries. Similarly, despite its title, the book is heavily focused on the particular case of Brazil, and references to other Latin American countries, where, as Matos points out, the history and current state of broadcasting is notably different, are not always adequately explained. Matos is right, for example, that many have understandably criticised as repressive the legislation introduced by the Chávez regime in Venezuela to regulate the media, but the context necessary to analyse the measures imposed by the government – the commercial media's extraordinary abuse of its power – is not explained. There are also some issues of writing style, which although generally clear, accessible and engaging, becomes repetitive in places.

However, those points are minor quibbles that do not detract from the immense value of this informative and thought-provoking book. I see it as essential reading for all those studying the Latin American media, but it is also likely to be of interest to many with a general interest in media systems or in Latin American politics.

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